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Isra wal Miraj - A voyage from a horizontal journey across a visible phenomenal world to the vertical cosmic pathways traversing all spiritual realms to Divine Reality

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The Isra and Miraj refer to two parts of a miraculous journey that Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) took in one night from Makkah to Jerusalem, followed by an ascension to the heavens. According to most authentic traditions this event took place one year before Hijrah. A mention of this account is in Surah Al-Isra in the Quran. **"Holy is He Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque (in Makkah) to the farther Mosque (in Jerusalem) - whose surroundings We have blessed - that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is All-Hearing, All-Seeing" (Quran 17:1)**. Detailed reports about it are found in the

works of Hadith and Sirah and have also been narrated from companions of the Prophet (Pbuh). The Quran here only mentions that the Prophet (Pbuh) was taken from the Kabah to the mosque in Jerusalem, and specifies that the purpose of the journey was such that Allah might **“show him some of His signs”**. The Prophet was indeed given an insight into some of the ultimate truths underlying Allah's creation. Beyond this, the Quran does not concern itself with any detail.

It is in according to the Hadith reports that Gabriel took the Prophet (Pbuh) at night from the Kabah to the mosque in Jerusalem on a buraq. On reaching Jerusalem the Prophet (Pbuh) along with other Prophets offered prayers. Afterwards the journey went far beyond the parameters of human travel. The Prophet (Pbuh) was accepted to the celestial regions where he witnessed remarkable signs and symbols of Divine majesty about which the Qur'an says; **“The eye was not diverted nor did it deviate; he indeed saw the greatest signs of his Lord.”(Quran 53:17-18).** The Prophet (Pbuh) met several great Prophets in different heavenly spheres. Numerous reports on the subject reveal that the Prophet (Pbuh) was enabled on this occasion to observe Heaven and Hell. He had been taken to heavens, galaxies and all those super spaces that even the most advanced technology will surely fail to find a path on. Finally, he reached the highest point in the heavens and was graced with an experience of the Divine Presence. It was a voyage from creation to Creator- a journey that reached far beyond the parameters of human travel, and far beyond a point which Gabriel too couldn’t traverse. Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) ascended unto the highest manifestation of the Divine Presence till the summation at ***sidrat-ul-muntaha*** - the lote-tree symbolizing the uttermost extremity of human proximity to the Divine. Only Prophet Muhammad, the most beloved of Allah, the greatest of His creation, the finest specimen of the artwork of the Ultimate Artist, could go to this uppermost limit. This voyage makes him unique, peerless and greatest man ever lived. He witnessed the divine signs and symbols and ultimately witnessed the One Who Himself is symbolized.

On that occasion the Prophet (Pbuh) received a number of directives; one among them was the institution of five daily prayers by Allah's ordinance, as an integral part of the Islamic Faith. It was the gift of the prayer that he received as a mean of expiation for the self and purification for the soul. It is through this prayer that a man ascends through decreasing stages of darkness to ever-increasing light of guidance. That is why to the believers, the scholars have reminded that

"*Prayer is the Miraj of the believer*" as spiritual journeying via prayer is a mode for moral rejuvenation and spiritual elevation.

Thereafter, the Prophet (Pbuh) returned from the heavens to Jerusalem, and from there to the Holy Mosque in Makkah. According to authentic reports when the Prophet (Pbuh) narrated the incidents of this extraordinary journey the following day to the people in Makkah, the unbelievers found the whole narration utterly amusing. In fact, even the faith of some Muslims was shaken because of the highly extraordinary nature of the account. Since the Prophet (Pbuh) himself did not leave any clear-cut explanation of this experience, Muslim thinkers including the Prophet's companions have always widely differed regarding its true nature. What was the nature of this journey? Did it take place when the Prophet was asleep or when he was awake? Did he actually undertake a journey in the physical sense or did he have a spiritual vision while remaining in his own place? These questions somewhat have been raised and pondered upon over all the ages. The great majority of the companions believed that both the Night Journey and the Ascension were physical occurrences, meaning that the Prophet was borne bodily to Jerusalem and then to heaven while a minority were convinced that the experience was purely spiritual. The Muslim scholars lay stress on the words asra bi-'abdihi **("He transported His servant by night")** occurring in 17:1, and contend that the term 'abd ("servant") denotes a living being in its entirety, i.e., a combination of body and soul. So Isra and Miraaj signifies both physical and spiritual journey.

In the best-known tradition, the Prophet introduces his narrative with the words: **"While I lay on the ground next to the Kabah, lo! There came unto me an angel, and cut open my breast and took out my heart. And then a golden basin full of faith was brought unto me, and my heart was washed (therein) and was filled (with it); then it was restored to its place"**. The Prophet had narrated his encountering at Jerusalem, and subsequently in heaven with a number of the earlier prophets, all of whom had undoubtedly passed away a long time before. According to one tradition, he visited Moses in his grave, and found him praying. In another tradition, the Prophet described how, on his Night Journey, he encountered an old woman, and was thereupon told by Gabriel, **"This old woman is the mortal world (ad-dunya)"**. In the words of yet another tradition, the Prophet **"passed by people who were sowing and harvesting; and every time they completed their harvest, (the grain) grew up again"**. Gabriel said, **"These are the fighters in**

Allah's cause (al-mujahidun).” Then they passed by people whose heads were being shattered by rocks; and every time they were shattered, they became whole again. Gabriel said, **“These are the ones whose heads were oblivious of prayer”.** Then they passed by people who were eating raw, rotten meat and throwing away cooked, wholesome meat. Gabriel said, **“These are the adulterers.”**

The majority of the Muslim scholars have agreed that Isra and Miraaj were both physical and spiritual. And the scholars that refer it to be performed by his spirit, while his body did not leave its place, also did not mean to say that the Ascension took place in a dream. They merely meant that it was his soul itself which actually went on the Night Journey and ascended to heaven, and that the soul witnessed things which it otherwise witnesses after death. Its condition on that occasion was similar to the condition of the soul after death. But that which the Prophet (Pbuh) experienced on his Night Journey was superior to the ordinary experiences of the soul after death, and, of course, was far above the dreams which one sees in sleep. As to the prophets (whom the last Prophet (Pbuh) met in heaven), it was but their souls which had come to dwell there after the separation from their bodies, while the soul of the last prophet ascended there in his lifetime. It is obvious that this kind of spiritual experience is vastly superior to anything that bodily organs could ever perform or record; and it is equally superior to what one terms as "dream-experiences", which has no objective existence outside the subject's mind. It is unlikely that the ordinary human beings will ever be in a position to fully comprehend spiritual experiences of this kind. One’s mind can only operate with elements provided by his consciousness of time and space; and everything that extends beyond this particular set of conceptions will always defy his attempts at a clear-cut definition. Among the both school of thoughts, the soundest opinion is the first one that states that that both body and spirit ascended. Allah The Almighty Says: **“The sight (of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) turned not aside (right or left), nor it transgressed beyond the limit (ordained for it)” (Quran, 53:17).** And sight is a part of body, not the soul. So again depicting that Isra and Miraaj was both physical and spiritual.

The two stages of one mystic experience and the questions arising from it somewhat have been resolved by the text of the Quran itself. The opening statement: **“Holy is He Who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the farther Mosque...” (verse 1)** itself indicates that it was an extraordinary event which took place by dint of the infinite power of

Allah. For quite obviously, to be able to perceive the kind of things mentioned in connection with the event, either in a dream or by means of intuition, is not so wondrous that it should be prefaced by the statement: **"Holy is He Who carried His servant by night..";** a statement which amounts to proclaiming that Allah is free from every imperfection and flaw. Such a statement would make absolutely no sense if the purpose of it was merely to affirm that Allah has the power to enable man to have either visions in the course of a dream, or to receive information intuitively. The words of the experience or a dream vision, was an actual journey, and the observation in question was a visual observation. All was contingent upon Allah's will that truths be revealed to the Prophet (Pbuh) in this fashion.

The Quran in clear terms informs that the Prophet (Pbuh), went from Makkah to Jerusalem and then returned to Makkah during the night owing to Allah's power. Statements declaring certain acts to be possible and others to be beyond the range of possibility are understandable if these acts are deemed to have been performed by creatures in exercise of the natural powers with which they are endowed. However, when it is clearly stated that it is Allah Who did something out of His power, any doubts about the possibility of these acts can be entertained only by those who do not believe Allah to be all-powerful. This momentous event makes one believe the possibility of impossibility. An event that itself was physically impossible, beyond the imagination of any man, depicts that anything is possible for Allah. It gives a glimpse of what Allah controls and what exists beyond where the man lives. It is a glimpse of His Magnificent signs. Only those with faithful hearts would be able to believe it.

The Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, immediately preceding his Ascension, was apparently meant to show that Islam is not a new doctrine but a continuation of the same divine message which was preached by the prophets of old, who had Jerusalem as their spiritual home. This view is supported by Traditions, according to which the Prophet, during his Night Journey, also offered prayers at Yathrib, Sinai, Bethlehem, etc. His encounters with other prophets, mentioned in this connection, symbolize the same idea. In accordance to an authentic tradition, on the occasion of his Night Journey the Prophet (Pbuh) led a prayer in the Temple of Jerusalem, in which all other prophets ranged themselves behind him, expresses in a figurative manner the doctrine that Islam, as preached by the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), is the fulfilment and perfection of mankind's religious development, and that Muhammad (Pbuh) was the last and the greatest of Allah's message

bearers. He was the greatest man who ever walked the face of earth and the only man who underwent the most miraculous and dignified journey - a journey no other human would ever undertake.

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